
The What, The Why, The How

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A few months ago I had the opportunity to facilitate a training session for 120 HR professionals from one of the major insurance companies. The session, **The Seven Separators of Great Facilitation**, is one of our marquee programs designed to have participants understand and practice seven skills we find essential to excellence in facilitation.

Masterful facilitators...

1. Establish and maintain a high energy level.
2. Ask starting questions that draw a vivid image.
3. Have a full toolkit of follow-up question types.
4. Recognize the “power of the pen.”
5. Carry the group through the process.
6. Prevent and resolve dysfunctional behavior.
7. Design customized processes to address the need.

(As an aside, the room was shallow and *very* wide, so the 16 tables were two-rows deep and extended across the width of the room. Since I don’t believe in facilitating from a stage, I probably got in a 5-mile walk by the end of the day!)

Despite the room dimensions, the session was well received. At dinner with the sponsor following the session, she made a comment that provides a key insight into facilitation in action.

“Michael, in our organization, people think facilitation is what you do when you record on a flipchart and distribute the notes for review. But you showed them and modeled for them the *behaviors* of a facilitator. We don’t often give people the behaviors.” -- Session Sponsor

As I reflected on her comment, I realized how insightful it was. See, the *Seven Separators* is designed to give participants details on what to do, how to do it and why do it, and provide

them an opportunity to practice the techniques. The sponsor was underscoring the value of giving people the behaviors – the how to do it. Let me give you an example.

The Starting Question

In explaining the **starting question** (separator #2), we present the following case: “You are teaching a customer service class and you want to get the participants to give you examples of poor customer service.” We then present two examples of a question (the what).

Question Type A	Question Type B
The first topic we want to talk about are bad customer service behaviors. What are some examples of bad customer service?	Think about a time when you experienced really bad customer service. Think about the situation, what the people did, the behaviors that got you really upset. Let’s build a list. What are some examples of bad customer service behaviors?

We then demonstrate how question type B has a far stronger impact on the participants. By drawing an image of the answers, the facilitator makes it much easier for the participants to answer the question (the why).

Finally, we provide a three-step formula they can use in building their own starting questions (the how).

<p>Step 1: Start with an image building phrase: "Think about . . . Imagine . . . If . . . Consider . . ." "</p> <p>Step 2: Expand the image with two or three sentences so the participants can see the answers.</p> <p>Step 3: Ask the Type-A, direct question.</p>

This approach of going beyond “the what,” and also describing why and how provides a foundation for ensuring that we provide high value to our participants. The sponsor’s comment gave me cause to reflect on our other training as well. Do we do as good of a job at describing the behaviors? Do we get to the what, the why *and* the how? Certainly food for thought.

Interested in learning more facilitation techniques? Check out our course, [The Effective Facilitator](#).

Michael Wilkinson is the Managing Director of Leadership Strategies – The Facilitation Company, and a much sought after trainer, facilitator and speaker. He is a Certified Master Facilitator and a Certified Professional Facilitator. As a past president of the Southeast Association of Facilitators and a board member of the National Institute of Facilitation, Michael is a national leader in the facilitation industry. You can get more tips from either of Michael's books, [The Secrets of Facilitation](#) or [The Secrets to Masterful Meetings](#). You can receive a signed copy through our website.

